

Four spaces of civic literacy education: a literature review

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Abstract. The purpose of this literature study was to obtain an overview of previous civic literacy projects and their characteristics as primarily described in educational science literature. Eighteen academic articles on civic literacy projects in higher education were studied in detail and coded using the qualitative data analysis instrument, Atlas.ti. The codes and quotations compiled were then divided in various categories and represented in a two-axis model. The definitions of ‘civic literacy’ found in the literature varied from an interest in social issues and a critical attitude to a more activist attitude (axis number 1). The analysis of the literature showed that, especially in more recent years, more students than citizens have benefited from civic literacy projects in higher education (axis number 2). The visualization of the findings in the two-axis model helps to place civic literacy projects in a broader frame.

Keywords: civic literacy, higher education, literature review.

1 Introduction

In preparation for living and working in the twenty-first century, the current generation of students must learn how to handle the tremendous amounts of information, both solicited and unsolicited, that is available to them. It is crucial for them to possess the ability to assess the reliability and usefulness of the information around them. Media and information literacy are therefore strongly linked to the concept of twenty-first century skills (www.p21.org).

Catts & Lau [1] distinguish four different contexts where the competence of information literacy is relevant:

- education
- workplaces
- health and well being
- the civic society.

Most research studies on information literacy are conducted in education. While research on information literacy at the workplace is less but still available [2] and health literacy is seriously studied by a specific group of researchers, information science research on 'civic literacy' is much harder to find and its perspective is seldom used by information literacy practitioners [3]. Active information seeking and critical appraisal of information and media are nonetheless essential components of democratic participation [1], [4 - 5]. This is particularly true in this age of fake news [6].

This paper presents an explorative literature research to inform a bigger research project, that will investigate just how an environment can be built so that citizens of the City of The Hague and students of The Hague University of Applied Sciences can work together to improve their abilities to judge the usefulness and the reliability of local information on news and events. Because of the social focus of our research group - hence its name: Information, Technology and Society -we have chosen in this project to approach the theme of media and information literacy in a setting where students and civic society organizations can collaborate together.

2 Methodology

2.1 Purpose of the research project

The aim of the bigger research project is the creation of a 'fact checking factory', where students of The Hague University of Applied Sciences and citizens of The Hague can learn from each other about how information on local occurrences and developments can be judged on their reliability and value in use. The aim of this goal is to create an experimental environment where the citizens and students can work together on the investigation of the quality of the information about their city area that is disseminated in newspapers, local magazines, broadcasts, and social media. Products and services include: dossiers on actual themes, fact checking of news messages, facilities for the consultation of newspapers, media and information sources, meetings to discuss local news messages and events, and games. The first two actions of the project passed during the periods November 2017-February 2018 and February-April 2018, preceding the local elections in The Netherlands.

2.2 Purpose of the literature review

The aim of the exploratory literature study in this paper was to find out how comparable projects in higher education have been organized. In a preliminary research we found the phrase 'civic literacy' as a key term for media and information literacy in a societal context [7]. The research question for the literature review therefore became: What are the characteristics of civic literacy projects in higher education that are described in the educational and in information science literature? More specifically, we were looking for answers on the following sub-questions:

- Which definition of 'civic literacy' was used in the described project?

- What are the benefits of citizen – university collaboration?
- What were the learning goals or desired learning outcomes for the students in the projects, and how can students be assessed in having reached these goals and outcomes?
- What are appropriate learning environments and what is the role of teaching professionals?

2.3 Search strategy for the literature review

For the information retrieval we used the bibliographic databases Eric for the educational domain and Lista and Lisa for the information science domain.

As mentioned before, the main keyword for media and information literacy in a civic societal context is ‘civic literacy’. The phrase ‘civic litera*’ (truncated to retrieve also ‘literate’) was combined with the phrase ‘higher education’ in one query in all three bibliographic databases. This resulted in a list with 14 references to relevant peer reviewed publications (28 December 2017). During the literature analysis it was remarked that ‘service learning’ was an important notion in civic literacy projects. We extended our research with a search in subject fields for ‘service learning’, ‘information literacy’, and ‘higher education’ in all three bibliographic databases, which resulted in 4 new relevant documents. The total number of studied papers was 18.

2.4 Analysis of results

The results of the literature search (journal articles) were studied in detail and coded with Atlas.ti. For this we used a code list that was created beforehand, based on the preliminary coding of a small subset of the research articles. Attachment 1 gives a systematic overview of the code list that was used. Based on a codes-quotations report we found answers on the forenamed research questions.

3 Results

3.1 Definitions

In the retrieved literature the construct of ‘civic literacy’ is at least understood as the capability and the willingness to listen to other people. Civic literate persons establish informed and affective connections with other human beings [8]. In other words, a social orientation is one of the qualities of a civic literate person. Another quality that is mentioned is “political knowledge and the skills to serve as active informed citizens” [9, p. 98]. Civic literate persons are capable “to make informed moral, economic, political and scientific judgements” [10, p. 29] and to participate in civil discourses [9]. One can also say that civic literacy enables “citizen empowerment and democracy” [12, p. 550]. However, most authors do not reckon political activism to civic literacy *education* because, in their opinion, that would overgrow educational goals. In the retrieved literature, it is Bauerlein [13] in particular who sees civic literacy as, for

instance, the knowledge of rights and laws and the skills to resist or protest. Charest et al. [14] consider the problems that their students sometimes have as ‘community issues’ that cannot be solved except only at school. This is, however, not a common opinion. Pollack [15] describes how a concept as ‘service learning’ strikingly developed from social activism in the 1960s to only an educational method nowadays.

In summary, one may conclude that civic literacy, according to the educational literature, refers to a person’s

- skills and willingness to communicate and cooperate with other people
- the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about issues that play a role in his/her societal environment.

The willingness to take responsibility for that environment (an ‘activistic attitude’) is mostly considered as a political issue that belongs to civic literacy but should not be purposed as an educational goal.

3.2 Benefits of citizen – university collaboration

Almost all of the educational literature described environments are organized as ‘service learning’ projects. In the previous section we already came upon the idea of ‘service learning’. This construct can be defined as “a form of experiential education that integrates a service project into the coursework” [16, p. 116]. As stated before, service learning is nowadays mainly regarded as a promising educational approach [15]. It is considered promising because students can learn much more from real life problems than from a more or less artificial school situation [12], [16 - 18]. The projects are often information-rich because students have to solve the unexpected problems that they meet [19]. The main role of citizens in such kinds of settings is to provide students with the opportunities to improve their skills in communication and cooperation – the facet of civic literacy that we mentioned as the first in the section definitions – and also to improve more affective personality dimensions like self-confidence and self-esteem [19].

Many authors have observed a declining social engagement among young adults since the 1970s [9 -11], [16], [20]. One of their purposes with service learning projects is the renewal of students’ involvement with the community and politics. A diminishing interest in community issues is nonetheless not recognized by all authors. For instance, Leek [17] argues that today’s young people do indeed seem to lack engagement with the more ‘institutional politics’ but that this does not mean that they are not engaged with society itself.

However it may be remarked that both observations (the restriction of service learning to an educational method and the aspiration of renewing social engagement) suggest that most of the authors are of the opinion that the educational environment benefits nowadays more from civic literacy projects than society itself. One of the exceptions is

the publication by Snaveley who mentions explicitly “developing information resources for those they are serving” and helping the community in “learning to distinguish between information supplied by [different] sources” [21, p. 39].

3.3 Learning goals for students and how they are assessed

An important learning goal for civic literacy programs is to foster students’ interest in civic and political issues. As explained before, this implies knowledge and skills to make informed judgements [14]. Pollack emphasizes that we do not only have to prepare students to “earn a living” but also to “continue the work of building an ever-more inclusive and just society” [15, p. 223]. A minority of the publishing authors has the opinion that it should also imply the actual willingness to execute actions [16]. It is noted that Newell [10] had already mentioned in 1988 critical thinking and lifelong learning as learning goals for twenty-first century learners.

As Maloyed [16] has remarked, it is hard to measure the achievement of those learning outcomes objectively. Most assessments of described civic literacy programs are therefore restricted to surveys and self-evaluations. These provide information about the usefulness of a project according to the participators and their experienced achievements, rather than their actual performances. Evaluation is, in other words, restricted to an institutional level, for instance the library’s contribution to the learning culture [22], as the measurement of individual student achievements is not involved.

3.4 Learning environments and the role of teaching professionals

As stated before, civic literacy is among other things defined as the skills and willingness to communicate and cooperate with other people. Collaboration in interdisciplinary teams is probably the best way to stimulate this [10]. Much of the scholar literature on civic literacy education describes projects where creative writing and public art are part of the learning process [14], [20], [23-24]. Developing communication or creative skills in this concept are extended to delivering contributions to the public discourse [24]. Leek [17] even suggests incorporating policy debates in service learning projects. The development of debating skills, in her opinion, includes the ability to gather information and to rethink it critically. Kranich describes the role that libraries in particular can play in those processes but also their function as information centres for citizens, as facilitators of reading groups, and as “public gathering spots” [9, p. 95], [11]. Riddle [19] has dedicated a complete article to the question of how academic libraries can contribute to service learning projects. His answers vary, from providing students information beforehand about the community where they are going to have their project, to information science students who provide instruction in public libraries, for instance about web search or page design. This last example provides profits to the students as well as to society.

The role of teachers in community projects is merely considered as providing guidance and feedback [16], [25] instead of instruction, although Newell [10] considers the

teacher also to be a ‘co-learner’.

4 Conclusion

The main conclusions from the results can be expressed as an educational environment with four different spaces. Figure 1 represents this environment with two axes, where the vertical axis expresses the learning goals (from interest in social issues to social activism), and the horizontal axis expresses the benefits for the students (an authentic and stimulating learning environment) or those for the society (help for excluded groups, and social justice).

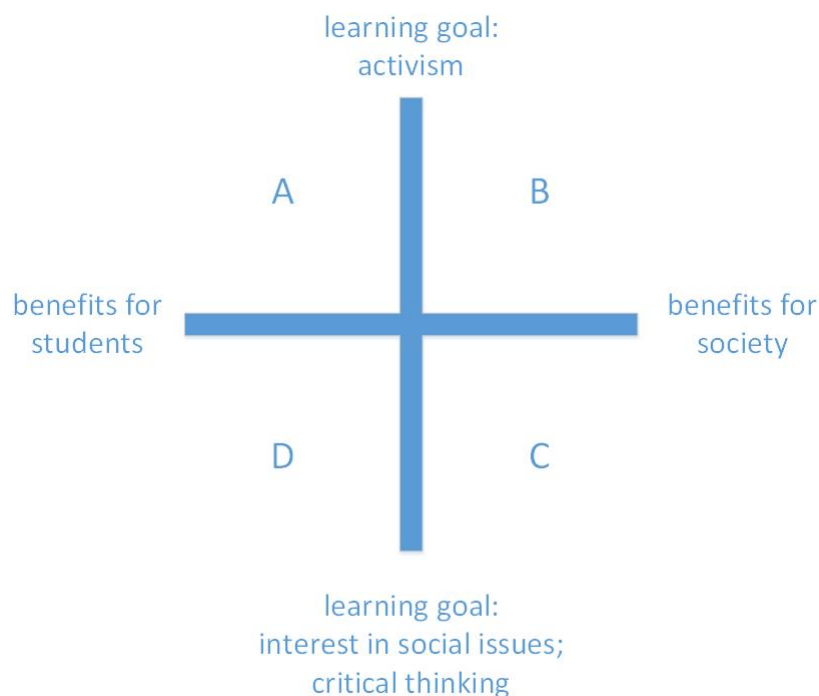


Fig. 1. Learning goals and benefits of civic literacy projects in higher education

Examples in section A of Figure 1 show projects that support students’ activism to improve their own circumstances at university. Section B shows the projects that provide support for citizen groups, for instance legal aid to people who are in conflict with the government or other more mighty organizations. As stated before, activist projects are more typical for the period 1960-1970, but are less suitable for today’s educational projects. Section C shows social projects, for example, helping lower

educated people with their tax forms or with legal issues, and section D shows projects that have social impact but are conducted within a more academic setting.

The boundaries between the four sections are more fluid than solid. The above-described fact checking project at The Hague University of Applied Sciences has characteristics of a section D project (we stimulate the students' interest in news and social issues and define clear learning outcomes for the students) but we do our best to let the citizens of the city of The Hague profit from the results.

5 Discussion

This research is limited in that the described projects are all situated in 'higher education'. This limitation was part of the research question and can be motivated with the background of our own institute, a university of applied sciences. It can be remarked that information literacy research is more focused on higher education than on elementary and secondary education [5]. This is why we did not expect that we would have found many different insights if the limitation to post-secondary education was not applied.

Another limitation of the research is that almost all of the literature reviewed was from North American universities. The phenomenon of 'service learning' is much more practiced in the USA and Canada than in Europe, and it might be that some topics are just called a bit differently in European countries. This does not mean that the information we found is not useful to apply in our own Dutch context. The content of the literature and the visualization of it in a two dimensional educational environment helped us to place the fact checking factory project in a broader frame. In the project evaluation with the students we asked them in which space they would place their finished project. Not surprisingly they put it in section D.

We are seriously considering the opportunities of moving the current project from section D to a place that has elements of both D and C (and maybe even B). In order to obtain this goal, it is recommended to invest extra time in collaboration with professionals from the community centres in the city districts and maybe even elementary and secondary schools. As previously mentioned, this is because the latter seems to be groups that earn more attention from information literacy research [5, p. 10]. It would be great to see the theory in this manner contribute to solve practical societal questions.

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Attachment 1

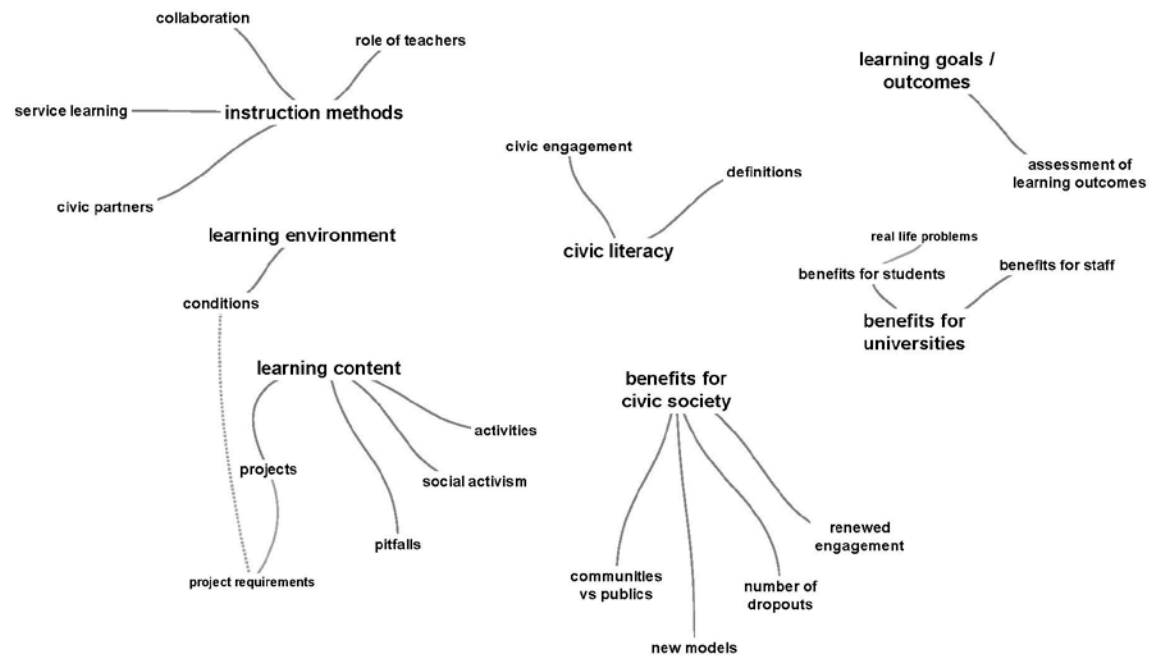


Fig. 2. Systematic overview of codes for the qualitative analysis of literature on 'civic literacy'